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EDITORIAL

SPECIAL ISSUE: Children's Rights in a 21st Century Digital World: Exploring Opportunities and Tensions

Guest Editors:

Vicki Coppock*, Edge Hill University, UK.

Jenna K. Gillett-Swan**, Queensland University of Technology, Australia.

On 20 November 1989, the United Nations General Assembly, comprised of delegates representing a wide spectrum of legal systems, cultures and religious traditions, unanimously adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Ratified by almost the entire international community, the CRC is widely regarded as the most important advocacy tool for children's rights globally. It creates an international legal framework for the protection and promotion of the human rights and fundamental freedoms of all persons under the age of 18 and incorporates the full range of human rights - civil, cultural, economic, political and social. For more than a quarter of a century the CRC has provoked significant changes in the way that children's rights are considered, conceptualised and enacted. Nevertheless, debates continue about whether the CRC and the 'children's rights agenda' is embraced fully within societal institutions. Evidence suggests that adults, researchers, policy-makers and professionals continue to grapple with actualising the rights enshrined within the CRC in their 'real world' practices (Coppock & Phillips, 2013; Phillips and Coppock, 2014).

Correspondingly, the past 25 years has witnessed the dramatic and exponential growth and use of digital technologies globally. Children's lives, experiences and opportunities are increasingly mediated by their engagement with digital technologies. Yet, until recently, knowledge and understanding of its role and impact has been limited and partial, tending to be dominated by adult perspectives emanating predominantly from the global North - which can (and does) lead to many misassumptions. In recent years, children's relationship with digital technologies has emerged as an important focus for academic study, and in a variety of disciplinary contexts (boyd, 2014; Gillett-Swan & Coppock, 2016; Livingstone & O'Neill, 2014; Third and others, 2014). The themes covered and issues raised in much of this research resonate with issues of interest and concern for researchers of children's rights; namely the social construction of "childhood" and "youth" (James & Prout, 1990), the conceptualisation of children as "social actors" – that is, as agentic human beings, rather than passive "human becomings" (Qvortrup, 1994), and the problem of "adultism" (Alanen & Mayall, 2001).

The exponential growth and impact of digital technologies on children and young people has also begun to draw the attention of those societal institutions and structures traditionally designed to promote children's rights (Council of Europe, 2014; United Nations, 2014). The role and importance of the mass media in promoting human rights was first established in 1978 with the UNESCO Declaration, of which Article 17 relates to children and young people. The importance of media engagement in promoting children's human rights was further established in Article 17 of the CRC which mandates for children's 'access to information and material from a diverse range of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of

his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health' (United Nations, 1989). More recently, the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child devoted a Day of General Discussion to the topic of *Children's Rights and Digital Media* on 12th September 2014 (United Nations, 2014). Fayoyin (2011) outlines three broad assertions when considering the relationship between the CRC, children's rights and digital technology. First, digital technology can promote access to and utilisation of key education, health and social services (Provision rights). Second, digital technology holds considerable prospects for empowering children and young people to become informed and active advocates of their rights (Participation rights). Third, digital technology also comes with considerable challenges that have a bearing on the potential for violation of children's rights (Protection rights). However, while the digital technologies are new, the tensions and contradictions surrounding children's rights to provision, protection and participation to which they relate are not. For example, while digital technology may offer increased flexibility in enacting various articles of the CRC (such as Articles 12 [the child's right to form and express an opinion when adults are making decisions affecting them], Article 13 [the child's right to get and share information] and Article 17 [the child's right to be able to access information via mass media that is important to their health and wellbeing]), it also provides increasing challenges in ensuring the best interests of the child (Article 3) are at the centre of decision-making, supervision and practice. Thus, the delicate balance between censorship and protection presents additional complexities when considering the opportunities and challenges for children's rights in a 21st century digitalised world.

Careful consideration of the balance between participation and protection in relation to digital technology provides fruitful opportunities for research that seeks to investigate children's rights issues in practice contexts. Such research is vital in order to counteract the tendency in contemporary popular discourse towards moral panic around the perils of digital technology and the demonization and pathologising of its effects. Sensationalised and highly emotive media coverage such as, '*Do we need to rescue our kids from the digital world?*' (Wakefield, 2014), '*Toddlers becoming so addicted to iPads they require therapy*' (Ward, 2013) and '*Don't panic... empower your child online*' (Woods, 2013), present a harmful and scaremongering view of technology. Such responses are characteristic of 'technological determinism' - that is the 'assumption that technologies possess intrinsic powers that affect all people in all situations the same way' (boyd, 2014 p.15). However, as boyd (2014) describes, '*It's Complicated*' and the nuanced realities of children and young people's interactions with digital technologies involve pros and cons. This adds increased complexity to the role of practitioners and researchers in seeking to promote children's rights and understand children's lifeworlds.

This special issue aims to engage critically with this complexity, exploring and reflecting upon some of the theoretical, philosophical, methodological and practical issues relating to the conceptualisation and actualisation of children's rights in a '21st century digital world'. Perspectives are shared from research into children's lived experiences across the globe (Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Egypt, Germany, Latvia, Morocco, The Philippines, Portugal, Serbia, South Africa, UAE, USA) and from diverse disciplines (Child Welfare, Communications and Media, Criminology, Cultural Studies, Early Childhood Education, Teacher Education, ICT, Legal Studies,

and Sociology). Together, the seven articles that follow explore a wide range of children's lived experience of engagement with digital technologies, provoke discussions pertaining to children's rights and digital media globally, and highlight some of the forces that complicate, block or distort the actualisation of their rights in diverse societal contexts.

In the first article **Naomi Sakr** focuses on how, in theory, digital media offers a powerful means to facilitate implementation of Article 17 of the CRC, creating opportunities for States Parties and other actors to ensure dissemination of information and material of 'social and cultural benefit to the child'. She explores the extent to which such opportunities have been taken up in three Arab countries – Morocco, Egypt and the UAE – where children have been vulnerable to particular forms of exploitation, abuse or neglect, and where efforts to protect and empower them through information have benefited from varying levels of energy and success. She argues that the importance of Article 17 is that children's access to information is an essential prerequisite for them to make informed decisions and to gain the skills and confidence to express their views (Article 12). Sakr draws on fieldwork data relating to child-related laws and media provision in Morocco, Egypt and the UAE and analyses this alongside documentary evidence submitted by these States Parties to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in their efforts to demonstrate compliance with the CRC in general and implementation of Article 17 in particular. Her critical analysis reveals tensions in the relationship between provision, participation and protection rights in relation to media and raises important questions about the role of the Committee in ensuring a consistent approach is taken when assessing compliance with Article 17. She links the related and intersecting issues of state

media censorship and power limiting children's participation, ability to be heard, and fundamental freedoms, concluding that 'neglect of Article 17 in the Arab world and beyond demonstrates the importance of holding on to human rights as a critical dimension of children's access to digital media' (p. 385).

The next two articles focus on the affordances presented by the use of digital technology in relation to children's rights in educational contexts. **Irina Verenikina and colleagues** explore Australian pre-school children's perspectives on their interactions with digital applications and the various contexts for digital play for young children. They problematise whether digital play supports or inhibits a child's ability for "traditional" (non-digitalised) play in relation to the restrictions and limitations potentially imposed by the apps in constricting free choice, participation and creativity. Children's limited involvement in key app decision-making (e.g. design, use, and creation) is highlighted alongside evidence of children's capacity to make meaningful contributions to decision-making – particularly for the improvement of teaching and learning practices. The authors highlight how children's intrinsic enjoyment of knowledge exploration and creation could be utilised by adults in providing opportunities for their inclusion and involvement in the creation and utilisation of digital technologies used in play and how children can be supported (and play enhanced) through utilising technologies to 'transfor[m] the play activity itself into digital play' (p. 391). The authors demonstrate some of the ways in which children can be in control of their own play in the digital sphere and can exhibit certain levels of choice and decision-making within these spaces – subject to the confines of the game's parameters and relative technological abilities. They question the 'optimal balance of "interactivity"' so that the features of interactivity motivate

children to engage in play but on the other hand would not inhibit their social interactions and their talk' (p. 397). Verenikina and colleagues also incorporate innovative methodologies that enable researchers to gain additional insights into children's perspectives and lived experiences in a less adult-dominated way.

Beryl Exley and Linda Willis explore the topic of children's pedagogic rights through an instrumental case-study example of an 8-year-old Australian travel blogger, 'Bob the Great'. Drawing on extensive written and photographic interactive travel blog posts created over 170 days, the authors developed an 'analytical framework capable of rendering visible what the travel blog project made available [to Bob the Great] in terms of the three pedagogic rights of individual enhancement, the right of social inclusion and the right to political participation' (p. 400). Exley and Willis demonstrate that Bob the Great's engagement with web 2.0 technology via his travel blog enabled him to employ all three of his pedagogic rights and benefit greatly from his experiences. Nevertheless, they advise cautious optimism in that the pedagogic right of political participation was less well evidenced in relation to those of individual enhancement and social inclusion. Thus, they conclude, 'promoting one of the pedagogic rights does not necessarily imply routing for the others' as 'the affordances of virtual open access online spaces as politically participatory sites was not manifested to capitalise on the transformative potential of this experience for this young child travel blogger' (p. 411).

The next three articles are concerned, in various ways, with the theme of "governance" of childhood and youth in the digital era, both in terms of adults' efforts to control children and young people's access to and engagement with digital

technologies, and adults' use of digital technologies as a professional "tool" for the surveillance of "problem" children and youth, "in their best interests". **Patricia Dias and colleagues** raise the issue of access and power when it comes to children's ability to freely engage with and access technologies. Their findings, based on qualitative research with families in Belgium, Germany, Latvia and Portugal, describe how children's rights (particularly children under the age of 8) are limited in the extent to which they can freely engage and explore technologies and applications of interest to them, due to parents' roles as "gatekeepers". The authors identify how the parents in their study were placed in a difficult position whereby they were aware of the potential consequences associated with negative or harmful interactions with technology, while also being aware of the need for technological literacy, empowerment, and exploration. A further tension is identified in that while 'the power exerted by parents over access and use may be understood as a limitation of the children's rights. On the other hand, parents are not always concerned with the right of protection as they believe — sometimes incorrectly — that they are in control of the content their children are exposed to' (p. 415). Dias et al. offer a framework for understanding the role of parental mediation when considering children's rights and digital technologies and an opportunity to reflect upon perception vs. reality when it comes to technological integration/implementation for children and young people.

Alyce McGovern and colleagues explore the highly contentious topic of 'sexting' from the perspectives of Australian young people themselves, revealing how these often diverge from others' understandings of the same phenomena. Through extensive legal and media analysis, the authors highlight how, although there is widespread political and public concern about the risks to children and young people

from using digital technology, children and young people themselves are rarely included in conversations about the issues involved and how they may affect their lives. The discrepancy between young people's freedom to express themselves and the dominant paternalistic, protectionist discourse exposes inherent tensions between what is in children's "best interests", censorship, and the role that technology plays in the long-term effects and consequences of decisions made by children and young people engaging in sexting behaviours. The article describes how sexting is seen as harmful for both "victims" and "perpetrators" and it is suggested that the perceived naivety of parents and children is sensationalised and perhaps exaggerated in an attempt for increased censorship and surveillance of children and young people's activities in the online space. The significant role that the media has in demonising sexting practice has implications for young people's awareness of, and engagement in, these practices. It also contributes towards subsequent negative perceptions of those who engage in these behaviours including a "gendered double standard" where females are judged more critically than males. The authors conclude that 'a one-size-fits-all approach to young people's sexting is not sufficient... we must look more broadly at the frameworks available to address the spectrum of sexting experiences of young people...[and] ensure that the voices of young people themselves are part of the conversation' (p. 439). In doing so, a greater balance between children's rights to their sexuality, freedom of expression and opinion, may be more fully recognised in contemporary debates about their lives and actions.

In her article, **Jessica Lovaas** problematizes the use of digital technologies in the governance and "archival surveillance" of youth in the foster care system in Southern California, USA. Drawing on qualitative research and utilising a Foucauldian lens,

she ‘examines the pervasiveness of governmental practices and their impacts on the psychological wellbeing and long-term trajectory of young people’ (p. 442). In this, she highlights the ways in which foster children’s rights are violated via the misuse of the technologies that are supposedly designed to protect them. Moreover, her analysis reveals that these practices ‘disproportionately criminalize youth of color’ (p. 442). The delicate balance between protection and control is considered, alongside contested interpretations of what constitutes these children’s “best interests”. Lovaas’ research reveals that the introduction of digital technologies into the systems and practices of foster care has served to disempower the children and youth and perpetuate ultimate adult power and control in the name of “child protection”. Moreover, the stifling of these children’s participation rights is found to have implications that transcend into their future adult lives. Interestingly, however, Lovaas explores how ‘the very digital technologies that dispossess can also be tools youth deploy to survive, connect, and resist’ (p. 444). She describes how young people are using the Internet and digital technologies to construct a digital counter-narrative. Thus, ‘through blogs, chats, and websites, Instagram, Facebook, and Snapchat these youth sought to create community, counter pathologizing tropes about foster youth, and ultimately, win back the ability to not just tell their story but also, as one participant phrased it, “tell it how it is.”’ (p. 451).

Finally, in their article **Mariya Stoilova and colleagues** take a future oriented perspective to reflect on the theoretical and methodological challenges of extending – or critically rethinking – existing research models developed in Europe to understand access and use of the internet among children in the global South. The authors observe that ‘the evidence on how use of the internet impacts on child rights and well-

being is still scattered and patchy in most countries, with some unsatisfactory measures, fast-outdated findings, and uncertainties regarding reliability, validity, and generalisability' (p. 456). Therefore, they argue, the future challenge is to identify the relevant factors shaping children's digital rights and experiences in different countries in ways that are contextually sensitive, yet able to produce comparable data. To this end, they report on the experience of designing a research toolkit – Global Kids Online – and piloting this in four countries on four continents – Argentina, Serbia, South Africa and The Philippines. The article places a strong emphasis on the importance of a 'bottom up approach' to 'comparative research that is holistic, rigorous, and sensitive to the voices and experiences of children and those who have the power to affect their lifeworlds' (p. 456). While recognising that much more remains to be done in this area, these authors provide a strong lead for the future direction research, policy and practice on children's rights and digital technologies in a rights-inclusive, and rights-respecting way.

The landscape of children's rights is constantly changing and the increased incorporation and widespread use of digital technology clearly presents both opportunities and challenges for all involved. Each of the articles in this special issue alerts us to the complexities of the task at hand, yet offer possibilities worthy of further exploration and development in relation to researching children's rights in the digital age. Furthermore, if we are committed to taking children's rights seriously, then it is vital that we, as powerful adults, facilitate continuous, open dialogue with children and youth about their use of digital technology and seek *their views* on how it can best be harnessed to serve their rights, now and into the future. It is our fervent hope that this special issue lays the groundwork for such dialogue and inspires future

exploration and development of the field of digital media and children's rights in the 21st century digital world.

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*VICKI COPPOCK is Professor in Social Science at Edge Hill University, Lancashire, UK. She is also a qualified and experienced mental health social worker. Vicki has an international reputation for research and publications involving critical social scientific analysis of childhood(s) and children's rights in contemporary law, policy and practice contexts. Much of her work is characterised by a focus on 'psychiatrised childhoods' and promoting a positive rights agenda for children and young people in mental distress. Her research practice is underpinned by a commitment to qualitative methodologies and participatory methods. She is currently researching the impact of counter-radicalisation strategies on Muslim children and young people in the UK. *Correspondence:* vicki.coppock@edgehill.ac.uk

****JENNA K. GILLETT-SWAN** is Senior Lecturer and researcher at Queensland University of Technology, Australia. Jenna's research focuses on children's rights, children's voice, and wellbeing. Her interest in the role of digital technologies in the lives of networked children and young people stems from her participatory research practices where the range of communicative tools that children choose to engage with outside of the research space can be utilised and their potential explored. She is currently researching the application of Voice Inclusive Practice across digitalised and non-digitalised spheres, and the navigating the ethics of displaying visual digital imagery of children in public forums. *Correspondence:* jenna.gillett-swan@qut.edu.au